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*Shamanic Representations: The Case of Nicholas Black Elk and the Sacred Vision*

## ABSTRACT

This essay is part of a longer piece that examines the changing representations, within a wide range of texts produced over the last century, of shamans and shamanic experiences. These include ethnographical, historical, autobiographical, and literary works, which are placed carefully within their intellectual as well as generic contexts. The main focus of this work is on the representation of shamanism by Western outsiders. Therefore, this article considers the encounter between a shamanic figure and a western “outsider” in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It goes over the representations of Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota shaman and his relationship with the poet John G. Neihardt. This work takes on the different approaches through which shamanism has been dealt with within the discourses on Native American shamanism in general. My approach gives a way of reconceptualizing the debates over magic, religion, and rationality by fully historicizing them, and showing for instance the ways in which particular figures become privileged as the site of scientific or experiential authority. In stressing the issue of representation rather than factual accuracy I bring together a diversity of texts in conjunctions that will reveal challenging similarities and continuities between works of scientific and scholarly inquiry, and other works that have always operated on the boundaries of legitimacy.

## BIOGRAPHY

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## SHAMANIC REPRESENTATIONS: THE CASE OF NICHOLAS BLACK ELK AND THE SACRED VISION

O Wakan-Tanka, behold Your Pipe! I hold it over the smoke of this herb. O Wakan-Tanka, behold also this sacred place which we have made. We know that its center is Your dwelling place. Upon this circle the generations will walk. The four-leggeds, the two-leggeds, the wingeds, and the four Powers of the universe, all will behold this, Your place.<sup>i</sup>

This essay is dedicated to the case of a Lakota shaman, Black Elk, the Oglala holy man first brought to the public eye by John G. Neihardt in the early 1930s, with the publication of *Black Elk Speaks*.<sup>ii</sup> Shamanism is a protean phenomenon that has accompanied mankind since prehistoric times. The term shamanism strictly refers to a distinctive religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia, but the broader practices have been present in most cultures, both in “primitive” societies and in “civilized” peoples, around the world. These involve the practice of a shaman, someone who embodies the ability and the will to achieve an altered state of consciousness, often on the verge of derangement, for a variety of purposes that involve the supernatural. Hence, the figure of the shaman, whose roles range from healer and priest to poet and psychopomp, assumes a central position in the representation of this most complex practice. Shamanic practices were indirectly registered and often misrecognized for a long time by Western observers and writers, and it is only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that they take on a particular privileged status within Western discourses on primitivism and debates over magic and rationality. In fact, Mircea Eliade’s classic work, *Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy*, was the first to provide a historical study of shamanism, systematizing and unifying its hitherto scattered ethnographic sources.<sup>iii</sup> Eliade was concerned with defining the essential features of the phenomenon in order to identify its unifying archaic religious patterns, which he believed played a key role in differentiating shamanism from other parallel cultures also based on possession and/or trance states.<sup>iv</sup> Yet Eliade was not the only one to approach the shaman as a specialist in the human soul, as other scholars also began writing about shamanism comparatively and exploring its essential ideological systems.<sup>v</sup> Henceforth shamanism becomes an acknowledged category in the developing social sciences. In a broader sense, this is related both to the rise and development of anthropology and the variations of Romanticism and its valorization of the irrational and the occult.

The book by Neihardt is in fact a hybrid autobiography “written” by the two men. It accounts for the main events of Black Elk’s life, from the depiction of his early childhood’s spiritual vision, which gave him shamanic powers and made him a leader among his people, to the very disintegration of that vision and the massacre of his people at Wounded Knee in 1890. For more than thirty years *Black Elk Speaks* remained relatively untouched by the large American public and despite some favorable reviews it was a commercial failure. But ever since the early 1960s, with its re-publication, the book has played a key role in the counter cultural movement, and has become a classic in American religious issues, both in and out of the Native American community, which in turn has come to owe Black Elk’s story much in its revitalization.

One of the most pervasive underlying narratives of the post-Enlightenment West has been that of a steady progression from magic to religion (first polytheistic and then monotheistic) and then to science. This supposedly reflects a development, an ascent of humankind, and it can be seen throughout the work in comparative religion and mythology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is clear, however, that this assumed sloughing off of primitive and magical beliefs simply did not happen, and this linear model was a wish rather than a reality, and the shamanic figure has been present throughout this process from the very beginning. Hence, the role of the shaman as repository of the sacred becomes a key factor to understand the debate over magic, religion, and rationality. Yet, in Western societies, as there seemed to have been such a change from magic to religion, that is, from ritual practices to religious beliefs, from ceremonial applications to reverent apprehensions, there have also been some further changes, as poignant and distressing, alongside the road of magic.

These other changes I refer to belong to a parallel road to that of religion, a road whose foundations are tightly connected to the rational principles of the Greeks: the road of science. Magic did not yield to religious belief alone, but also to scientific practice. In the early stages of humanity’s scientific-oriented mentality the line between magic and science was not as clearly defined as it is today. The fathers of modern science themselves were indeed magicians in their own time. Yet, western culture’s enlightened perceptions, born on the rise of the scientific revolution, now three centuries old, seemed to have taken the whole world upon its materialistic agenda.

Today, as the majority of societies throughout the globe appear to become more and more secular with the rise of a technological revolution which, in the long run, seems to aim at melting all different cultural practices into

one insipid global village-like amalgam, magic appears to be even more distant to people's habits, and religious beliefs themselves begin to fade into some new road we are yet to envision.

Certainly one thing is to be found on this new road, namely that there is no place for the sacred. Everything that might bear some relation to the divine is hastily considered an illogical postulate belonging to the realm of myth or illusion. All that was once magic became in due time religious, that is, that which had once been a practice was turned into a belief as it slowly lost its prime position among the human activities. The religious man turned away from a magical past, placing it under the realm of the non-existent, the mythic, as it were, and looked ahead to his then new belief in the divine. Therefore, now, one can see the non-believers of our time also turning their back on religion as they embrace the dawn of this new technological era.

The native peoples of North America can be seen as an example of this mutative process. They have been experiencing cultural assimilation since their encounter with Western civilization and their own legacy appears to be at stake. From social crisis to cultural disruption to religious assimilation, my focus here will be on the Native Americans' religious metastasis, but also, eventually, on the ways Native American spirituality is used by whites to reassess their own religious beliefs.

As long as shamanism stands at the core not only of Native American but also perhaps of all religions alike, the shaman becomes a key figure in the understanding of Native American religion. The shaman, who has also the roles of magician, medicine man, and poet, is someone who can get away from the earthly daily life and dive into other layers of consciousness by means of magical flight. In other words, he can shift from the rational common-sense world to a magical realm of supernatural recognition, by means of the vision quest, which in fact eventually determines the shamanic power of the healer.<sup>vi</sup> This rather primitive and uncanny ability comes to reinforce the idea of paradox and ambiguity surrounding the shamanic figure. Beings who have to step into the spirit's realm, that is, the land of the dead, the healers, if nothing else, relate to man's absolute unknown domain in a very unusual manner. Such a quasi-divine understanding of the world would not be seen with the most welcoming eyes either by the defenders of monotheistic established religions like Christianity, or by the keepers of the Western *status quo* in general.

It is only relatively recently that Western researchers have categorized shamans as such and looked at American practitioners in this light. Only around the late 19th century did anthropologists begin to study the practice of these primitive healers. Although earlier missionaries noted the practices and beliefs of healers, medicine-men etc, theirs was regarded as a devious and devilish religious practice, having hardly anything to say to any civilized society. Only later was shamanism little by little unveiled as a deeply rooted religious belief and practice that had much to say not only to primitive but to other cultures as well.

Ever since the Europeans came to "discover" America the native people of the New World have been persistently and fiercely destroyed. It is true that today we might find more Native Americans than in earlier centuries, as "Indian populations double every generation now."<sup>vii</sup> Notwithstanding, the increasing number of Indians, instead of bringing forth a renaissance of their culture, were in danger of becoming just another minority, many of whose own members did not recognize, as they were assimilated into the "American way of life," what was once regarded as sacred belief by earlier generations. We could say that this assimilation started at the very crossroads where the Indians met the Europeans, but it was by no means an easy encounter. Only by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the last free Native American "rebels" forced to surrender to the United States government. The use of belligerent force was not the only one employed by the new settlers. Even more important was to strike at what seemed to be the Indians' vital strength: their religion. It was certainly not an easy job for the Jesuits, Protestants, and others to persuade a people who worshipped a whole series of donor gods, taking form as animals or as the sun, to believe, for instance, in Original Sin. How would they convince the Indians of their sinful behavior and the need of repentance? How would they make them change from a religious practice of the senses, that of shamanism, to a simple belief of the mind, that of Catholicism? Cleverly enough, the Jesuits found their way to catechize such an apparently pagan people through the people's own way, namely through their own "priests," the old shamans. It is my contention that the so-called conversions, as well as other similar encounters between Indians and white men, did not take place having the white man as the main agent, but the Indians themselves and this allowed a process of conversion which was much more syncretic and two-way. In fact, according to James Clifford, writing in a more general context, "many ethnographers have commented on the ways, both subtle and blatant, in which their research was directed or circumscribed by their informants."<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, as I will argue, there seems to be a possibility in the case of the Indians of the Plains in the 19th century, that those being converted were not so passive and submissive to coercion as generally believed.

It is worth pointing out some aspects of the Plains Indians' religious system, particularly that of the Lakota Sioux, or *Oyate*, (the native designation for the nation), which has very strong shamanistic elements. On the one hand, it gives a large place to individualistic expression, as the vision quest requires an abiding perseverance of the pledger. On the other hand, it consists of a number of different rituals to be performed most of the times under the tutelage of a shaman. The closest entity the Lakota have to what Western culture refers to God is *Wakan Tanka*, or the Great Spirit, as explained by Black Elk himself to Joseph Epes Brown.<sup>ix</sup> According to the traditional accounts, *Wakan Tanka* turned itself into White Buffalo Cow Woman to bring the Indians the most holy pipe, so that His people could smoke from it to live in harmony and peace with each other. The pipe certainly occupies a central position in their ritual practices and it is used in the most important ones, such as the sweat lodge, a purification ritual for healing, the vision quest, an individual spiritual pursuit, the *yuwipi*, a calling of the spirits ceremony, and the Sun Dance, or *Wacipi Wakan*, (which will receive a fuller explanation later on), a more complex communal ritual involving sacrifice, redistribution of wealth, and visionary experiences.

We should bear in mind that it is almost impossible to talk about such a system in isolation, because the reservation period brought about significant changes concerning not only religion but also social and cultural disruption. In order to maintain their identity against the pressure of the dominant culture they had to cope with from then on, Native American Indians, after two of their main cultural practices were gone, namely war and the buffalo hunt, clung to that which told them of things which were their own: ritual practice. It is also worth mentioning that although religion is considered by Western observers as being a separate entity from culture, it is not quite the same with the Indians. As Clyde Holler puts it, "in the old Lakota system, religion was woven into the fabric of culture ... 'traditional religion' is purely a product of the reservation period, during which the Sun Dance, once the central Lakota religious ritual, became the central ritual of traditional Lakota religion."<sup>x</sup> In fact, not only among the Lakota but also with native peoples the world over, culture and religion are but one whole, wherein the belief in the sacred and the practice of ritual ceremonies intended to represent the spiritual world appear as an underlying substance that in a way pervades and controls all other so-called cultural manifestations.

This whole complex of ritual practices was under pressure with the changes in way of life brought about by the white men's presence. The destruction of traditional patterns and corresponding decline in relevance of some ceremonies set the scene of the Plains Indians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1872, the churches obtained direct control over the reservations as the United States government decided on reform programs in order to solve the Indian problem. Instead of eliminating Indians, as the army had been doing, the program would focus on eliminating Indianness. As stated by Holler:

[The whites] regarded it as obvious that if all Indians were fully assimilated, the Indian problem would disappear. Since their proposal was essentially to replace genocide with cultural genocide, repression of the native religion and its priesthood was an obvious strategy ... The missionaries in the field who confronted the task of civilizing and Christianizing the Indians had struggled for years against traditional culture and the medicine men, whose influence and interests were necessarily opposed to the missionaries.<sup>xi</sup>

One of those men who became Catholic catechists after having spent their previous religious life as healers and/or weather magicians was Black Elk. John Neihardt published the book arising out of his encounter with Black Elk in 1932. In order to overcome the linguistic barriers of his undertaking Neihardt's interviews with Black Elk were translated by the latter's son Benjamin and transcribed by the poet's daughters Hilda and Enid. For more than twenty years Neihardt's book was almost ignored, but during the 60's revolutionary counter cultural years it became a success and has probably become the most read book on American Indians ever since. Then it was taken by the general public, for another twenty years, as a mythical narrative, an authentic and elegiac account of a dying culture, the true story of the last of the Holy men of the Oglala. Even though the public reception remained the same, an important scholarly shift occurred, when in 1984, Raymond DeMallie published the original transcripts taken down by Neihardt's daughter after Black Elk's son translated his words from Lakota to English.<sup>xii</sup> DeMallie's book revealed that what Neihardt had written was not always what Elk had said, and much of it had been changed by Neihardt, himself a poet, in order to give his book a Romantic and elegiac narrative which was not necessarily Black Elk's. After that not only Elk's accounts but also his life history became a highly scrutinized subject as shall be seen. The importance of Black Elk, who was first and foremost a religious leader of his people, in contemporary American culture has led some scholars to consider him "the greatest religious thinker yet produced by native North America," who did not avoid the challenging situation encountered by his people at their often gruesome cultural crossroads, and responded "to the same challenges personally and intellectually."<sup>xiii</sup>

The significant role occupied by *Black Elk Speaks* today in America reflects Black Elk's religious authority within American culture. We can also say that this authoritative position belongs to Black Elk's people at large, that is, Native Americans, who have been regarded by contemporary society as repositories of spiritual insight and environmental responsibility. Ever since the 1960s, the figure of Black Elk has emerged as an icon for Native American revitalization. *Black Elk Speaks* has become the necessary spiritual assistance for urban raised Native American activists, as well as other (mainly young people) members of American society at large, seeking for change in America's involvement in the Vietnam war and in the pervading smugness and co-option of middle-class American way-of-life. As Amanda Porterfield points out, this current trend stems from "deep-seated tendencies in American culture to regard the natural world as a vehicle for religious experience, and to regard Indians as noble savages who enjoy an original relationship with the spiritual powers of nature, free of the corruptions of civilization."<sup>xiv</sup> According to Porterfield, the figure of Black Elk has "functioned as a catalyst of a religious transformation in American culture," since he has helped to put Native Americans on the center stage of religious matters rather than their earlier secondary role.

The way in which Neihardt came to see Black Elk, that is, as a tragic character whose vision depicted an idyllic culture of the past with hardly any regard for its significance concerning the ever present strength of native cultural representations, was very much determined by the historical period in which the Nebraska poet was writing. As Porterfield points out, this sort of attitude was typical of "the new approach to the study of Native Americans under the leadership of the German American Franz Boas."<sup>xv</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Boas helped anthropology to develop into a less racist and more humanist system of thought. Thereafter anthropologists recognized the significance of religious matters in native communities, which came to be seen as internally coherent cultural systems as opposed to the older normative concepts based on racist arguments. Yet, the cultural relativism of Boasian anthropology, in spite of such improvements concerning the representations of native societies while seeing them as complex systems, tended not to deal with cultures in change that were still vitally struggling for survival in a culturally hostile environment of assimilation and acculturation. Neihardt also retained, unlike Boas, certain idealistic postulations based on the old Rousseauvian concept of the noble savage. Thus, Neihardt can be seen, historically speaking, as part of the Boasian attempt at salvage ethnography, but also retaining a view of Indians as noble savages doomed to perish rather than survive against the onslaughts of modernity.

However, Neihardt was himself a poet and hence his Romantic views on Indians were also influenced by another American current, the Transcendentalist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stemming from Kantian idealism, in which perception and reason depend on intuitions about the nature of reality, and from Wordsworthian Romanticism, in which the observations of the natural world revealed religious truths, American Transcendentalist writers celebrated Nature as a source of spiritual inspiration. According to Porterfield, the two main figures of American transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, advocated the same ideas found in *Black Elk Speaks*. On the one hand, as she points out, for Emerson, "nature was a living bible of spiritual revelations and signs," in which the poet became one with nature in a "form of religious experience," where the self vanishes in a transcendental oneness; likewise, a parallel experience can be seen in Black Elk's vision, in which the shaman identifies with the divine "while finding an absence of 'all mean egotism.'"<sup>xvi</sup> As Porterfield asserts, the writings of Emerson and other Transcendentalists "exemplify a form of religious expression that is a hallmark of the culture of American literary expectation that many of Black Elk's readers have inhabited." On the other hand, as Porterfield states, we have Thoreau's literary influence over *Black Elk Speaks* in that it "contains an authentic Indian voice reporting on something other than a stock antagonism between nature and civilization."<sup>xvii</sup> In *Walden* Thoreau aims at seeing the world as Indians would have seen it in the earlier days. Despite this prior embrace of "savagism" to be found in the book, Thoreau also expressed other views. One of the guides he hired in his travels about Maine was Polis (a Penobscot Indian), whose behavior, astonishingly depicted by Thoreau, contrasted deeply with his previous Romantic assumptions of native attitudes. According to Porterfield, Polis in fact taught Thoreau, through his love of society and devotion to Christianity, that "Native American Religious beliefs and cultural customs were diverse, and could not be lumped together as 'Indian.'"<sup>xviii</sup> An obvious parallel can be traced here with Black Elk, in that Neihardt, despite trying to circumscribe his subject within a Romantic "savagist" view typical of his own agenda, gave him a voice that has helped, through the subsequent representations of the original words of the Lakota shaman, the recognition of Black Elk as repository of the complexities and diversity of a living culture.<sup>xix</sup>

Black Elk indeed became the repository of his nation's hope for a better future in the visionary words of the Sixth Grandfather, who spoke to him during his shamanic initiation (Elk's Great Vision): "My boy, have courage, for my power shall be yours, and you shall need it, for your nation on the earth will have great troubles."<sup>xx</sup> Throughout his life, Elk fought in order to see his vision fulfilled. As he starts telling Neihardt his

life-story, sitting upon a hill as an old man who looks back across the meadows of his youth, Elk humbly speaks:

But now that I can see it all as from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it; of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people's heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered; and of a people's dream that died in bloody snow.<sup>xxi</sup>

This is one passage that we know Neihardt put together himself later on as a conclusion. With words that might in fact have been embellished by Neihardt's poetic vein, "Elk's somewhat gloomy message" reveals notwithstanding the condensed angst of a slaughtered people. I believe Neihardt's book to be a hybrid of both his and Elk's words, and whereas this previous passage might indeed belong to the poet who wanted to vent the shaman's pain, the words that follow it seem more likely to belong to the shaman's poetic vision: "But if the vision was true and mighty, as I know, it is true and mighty yet; for such things are of the spirit, and it is in the darkness of their eyes that men get lost." It is my contention that much of *Black Elk Speaks*'s appeal is related to Elk's awareness of literary culture being the best representational tool for translating the sacred into more secular or aesthetically effective language.

In his interpretation of the Great Vision, R. Todd Wise discusses "the hermeneutical implications of approaching Black Elk's vision as literature."<sup>xxii</sup> Wise asserts that his "article as a whole attempts to support Black Elk's assumption" that, not only through his words but also by his choosing Neihardt, the significance of his vision could be grasped by an outsider to Lakota culture "through the medium of a text." As Wise points out, even the meeting between the shaman and the poet was in itself a ritualized event.<sup>xxiii</sup> Accordingly, Black Elk went through extensive ritual preparations for Neihardt's visits (including the erection and decoration of a tipi, feasting, dancing, and eventually the offering of the sacred pipe), which were followed by the very adoption of the poet's family (his two daughters and himself) by the shaman's, with Elk "becoming a spiritual father to all three."<sup>xxiv</sup> Another significant ceremonial aspect is the Indian names given to the Neihardt family by Elk, in which the poet's was "Flaming Rainbow," referring to John Neihardt's talent as "word sender."<sup>xxv</sup>

Wise calls our attention to the fact that social science researchers have consistently charted prejudices against visionary experiences by means of pathologizing visions. Shamanic visionary states have repeatedly elicited cultural prejudicial views on the part of traditional Western scholarship, which has often diagnosed them, as well as shamanism itself, as a function of mental disorders.<sup>xxvi</sup> As Wise puts it: "although many current discussions distinguish between the 'exemplary' and the 'pathological' attraction and orientation of visions, there is enough said to indicate a hermeneutical problem with visionary experience in general."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The visionary experience, having been transcribed to a page, presents a need to distinguish the way it will be read, not only because the reader will probably be an outsider to Lakota culture but also because of the essential nature of the vision, which is primarily visual rather than literal. Hence, the debate over the symbolic and/or literal understanding of Black Elk's Great Vision calls, as has been observed elsewhere, for a "semiotics of image,"<sup>xxviii</sup> thus the necessary distinction between an often-unknown referent of a symbol and the known identity of a sign. As Wise points out, "not only does the reader have to contend with how Black Elk's vision is to be read as literal sign or metaphoric symbol or both, but he also has to contend with how it is to be seen or envisioned."<sup>xxix</sup> In other words, in order to fully capture the significance of the vision, the reader has not only to understand the meaning of what he is reading but also to visualize what he is being told. All in all, Wise's argument is that the Great Vision is mostly a symbolic text and therefore should be approached as one. A historical-critical approach cannot meet the multileveled complexity of meanings of an ahistorical, that is, symbolic, hermeneutical one. Yet, Wise sees both methods as useful tools for attaining an overall perception of a ritualized text such as the Great Vision.

On the one hand, the rational approach of a historical analysis to a symbolic image allows a certain distance between then and now which renders a more critical perspective. On the other hand, it could never be the only tool to apprehend the symbolic meaning of a visionary experience, which calls for some subtler forms of analysis than objective distance; something more closely related to ritualized reading, that is, a more participatory activity on the part of the reader regarding not only what is printed on the page but also what is left out of it. Perhaps the key to understand Black Elk's Great Vision was given by Black Elk himself. In the end, all he provided as a final interpretation of his visionary representation of the sacred was silence, which is enlightening once we acknowledge the ultimately unspeakable nature of the symbol. Black Elk's choice of literary culture to convey his message in itself speaks more of his decision to convey a never-before-told story (both his and his people's) to a much wider audience than the previous native circles of an orally based culture. His choosing to speak through a poet, despite the latter's belonging to such a different cultural tradition, is also

revealing of his intentions to render his visionary words the multileveled understanding of symbolic interpretation. Yet, Neihardt's background, both spiritual and literary, provided him with his own agenda in his depiction of Black Elk's life and vision.

Neihardt's religious frame of mind was then beginning to take form, which was by no means related to any traditional Christian or Western faith as has been seen. Soon after his "dream" Neihardt was introduced to Vedantic philosophy and by reading the Upanishads his spiritual impulses were given their final shape towards his preparation for entering Black Elk's world of spirituality.<sup>xxx</sup> As Pendleton asserts, the Vedantic way of thinking allowed Neihardt a new "framework through which to interpret his world and the many unusual experiences he had throughout his life, beginning with his childhood flying dream."<sup>xxxi</sup> In Neihardt's own words:

In my early teens I came under the influence of Vedanta philosophy. It was my natural way of looking at the world that drew me to this, for I see now that I was always the mystic, and this by no desire to be ... This has grown steadily upon me, and it is now my chief dependence, both for living and for working.<sup>xxxii</sup>

All in all, Pendleton's argument is that the two men shared a spiritual bond that provided Neihardt with the necessary tools to recognize the spiritual reality of Black Elk's shamanic background. As he points out, "those who dismiss *Black Elk Speaks* as a work tainted by a white man's Christianity or a case of literary imperialism ignore the rich spiritual life of a man whose beliefs defy easy categorization."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Much has been said about Neihardt's "literary intrusions into Black Elk's system of beliefs."<sup>xxxiv</sup> The fact that Neihardt chose to depict Elk's religious life as a holy medicine man without mentioning his later conversion to Catholicism has given scholars the opportunity to question the authenticity of his book as well as to consider it a stereotype, rather than a significant religious account, as was Neihardt's intention.<sup>xxxv</sup> For instance, Michael F. Steltenkamp, himself a Jesuit, in his book on Black Elk, wherein he aims at revealing the untold story of Elk's Catholic years through his daughter's (Lucy Looks Twice) memories of that period, explains that Neihardt's characterization of Black Elk was so evocative that "it has been expropriated and utilized on behalf of diverse forms of special pleading."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Steltenkamp also refers to Joseph Epes Brown's book, *The Sacred Pipe*.

Brown's account of Elk's vision on Lakota belief was written some twenty years after Neihardt's, and Steltenkamp sees it as not advancing our understanding of Black Elk's message. According to Steltenkamp, Elk's representation, mainly based upon those two books, "has become *the* conventional stereotype par excellence." In his view, those readers "aware of this larger frame of reference," have still "the task of separating the wheat from the chaff – discerning whether Black Elk was a kind of 'modal man' of the Sioux, a mystic, or a myth."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Other scholars, such as William K. Powers and Julian Rice, have offered contrasting accounts to Steltenkamp's. According to Powers there is nothing contradictory in Black Elk's actions as both medicine man and catechist, since it is a Western conception, and not Lakota, that an individual can only belong to one religion at a time. As Powers points out, Lakotas were not bound to one single religious system and could very possibly assimilate traits of alien systems into their own, "drawing from each or all those prayers, songs, ritual, histories, myths, and beliefs that satisfied the needs of the particular time and its attendant crises."<sup>xxxviii</sup> A similar analysis is given by Rice, who explains the incorporation of Christian traces into traditional Lakota belief as being quite normal given that the Lakota world view "was especially receptive to vision in symbolic forms because its thinking was, as a rule, more metaphorical."<sup>xxxix</sup>

It is interesting to observe here how each critic manipulates the figure of Black Elk, in order to adapt him to their different approaches at representing the holy man. Whereas Steltenkamp, the Jesuit, regards *The Sacred Pipe* as mere stereotype of Native religion, Holler, the philosopher, sees it as Elk's clearly conforming "traditional religion to the Catholic model for the purpose of comparing and equating the two."<sup>xl</sup> For Holler such a conclusion should be obvious, since "there is no mention of a seven-rite Lakota ritual complex in the literature before *The Sacred Pipe*." But even for a somewhat experienced anthropologist, William K. Powers, it apparently did not seem so obvious. Discussing two of the oldest Lakota rituals (the vision quest and the sweat lodge), he states in the very first paragraph of his book *Beyond the Vision*, that "both are regarded as part of the seven sacred ceremonies of the Lakota, all brought simultaneously to the people by White Buffalo Calf Woman."<sup>xli</sup> Whether Steltenkamp himself failed at separating the wheat from the chaff, or Powers was treating Black Elk as his own source for authentic Sioux religion rather than a Sioux/Christian composite, therefore basing his findings on literary rather than ethnographic sources,<sup>xlii</sup> or Holler's incomplete interpretation was based on a single foundational concept of Elk's several leveled worldview, it seems that the more accurately each one of these writers try to represent Black Elk the more evasive the shamanic figure appears under the light of their respective theories.



Shaman, priest, fraud, my point here is to say that Elk was a bit of everything. He can be found in both Neihardt's and Brown's visionary portrayal and in Steltenkamp's urge to represent his Catholic prestige. "Chosen" by the Jesuits because he had previously walked on the road of visionary insight of Indian religious practice, the holy man was then to step on another path, that of Catholic belief. Having taken part in both the last period of "freedom" among the Native Americans in the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the cultural transformations brought by the white man's increasingly dominant presence at the turn of the century, Black Elk was *the* vivid presence of those changing times.

In spite of their nomadic way of life and the constant shifts brought about by many different causes such as wars or weather, there seems to be one abiding presence in their struggle for survival, namely their belief in the sacred. A religious identity, that of believing in the invisible forces, which could become accessible through ritual practices, as stated above, indeed pervades the Lakota world. That is not to say that adaptation did not take place in religious matters as well. On the contrary, central religious figures such as Black Elk are a clear indication of the Indians' need and willingness to adapt to a new environment. In other words, although Black Elk is said to have left behind his previous shamanistic practices to embrace the Catholic preaching, he never abandoned his childhood visionary dream, which was about holding together and finding a way for his people to survive. In fact, Black Elk may not have fully apprehended the distinction between traditional religion and Christianity. According to Holler, "if his vision and his relationship with sacred power was truly paramount in his religious understanding, Black Elk may have seen one thing – the sacred – where others see two things."<sup>xliv</sup> His belief in the sacred, in his mission to lead his people to better days was always there; in fact, that seems to have been his only real motivation to carry on with his preaching of the word of God.

Although Black Elk did very well as a Catholic catechist, being constantly praised by the Jesuits for his work, he never preached in English. He always delivered his religious messages in Lakota and the Bible he used in his preaching was a translation by the Jesuits. It is significant that Black Elk would refer to the Catholic God not by the word God, or any other typical Christian noun such as the almighty or the omnipotent, instead he kept referring to it as *Wakan Tanka*, the Lakota term to designate the superior force present in all beings, or as he had once told Neihardt when explaining the Sacred Pipe's meaning, "the Spirit of the World."<sup>xlv</sup> According to Gideon H. Pond, a Congregational missionary, who arrived in Sioux territory in 1834, "all Dakota gods and *wakans* are mortal, being eternal only in the sense that they succeed themselves."<sup>xlv</sup> His explanation of the term is quite interesting:

The word *wakan* signifies anything which is incomprehensible. The more incomprehensible, the more *wakan*. The word is applied to anything, and everything, that is strange or mysterious. The general name for the gods in their dialect is this, *Taku-Wakan*, i.e., that which is *wakan*.

It is very important to try to understand the meaning, or meanings, of such a foundational religious concept. Differently from the Christian concept of God, which tells of the supreme eternal omnipresent father-like divine being, the *Wakan* brings forth quite a different message. The idea of the sacred, rather than the eternal, gives the Indian word a certain adaptability that perhaps the Christian concept fails, or refuses, to provide.

Black Elk stood firm by his vision to preserve the belief in the sacred of his nation. His becoming a Catholic by no means represented a rupture with his vision; on the contrary, Elk recognized in the Christian faith many similarities that could in fact work for his people and not against them. He understood the message of Christ as very much like the one received in his childhood vision, that of humility and goodness, that of the sacred being beyond the understandable:

These four spirits are only one Spirit after all, and this eagle feather here is for that One, which is like a father, and also it is for the thoughts of men that should rise high as eagles do. Is not the sky a father and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet or wings or roots their children? ... And because it means all this, and more than any man can understand, the pipe is holy.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Concerning the message of Christ, Holler traces a parallel between Jesus's and Elk's messages, as a means to shed some light in "the case with the oral tradition surrounding Black Elk today."<sup>xlvii</sup> According to Holler, both Jesus and Elk never wrote anything and therefore their teachings are continually modified and applied to new situations. Holler then invokes the need for a historical reconstruction of both figures, in order to avoid the "normal functioning of an oral tradition to appropriate the teachings of a great religious master." Once again the shamanic figure's depiction can not be accomplished by one single form of representation, and the historical "reconstruction" appears to be inevitable, not to say the essential condition, even though it will also, inevitably fail to pin him down eventually.

Steltenkamp argues that unless the Catholic life of Black Elk is brought to the public eye there will never be a complete understanding of the holy man's message. He believes that Neihardt's representation of Black Elk lacks an important, if not essential, part of his life without which the very vision he told Neihardt about would be void of a deeper meaning, because, according to Steltenkamp, via Lucy's account, Black Elk completely abandoned his ritualistic practices after his conversion. That might be true and indeed there seems to be no proof of Black Elk's intention of looking back to his medicine man's activities during the years he spent as a catechist, but we could also say that very possibly he did not quite forget his shamanistic background, not only because of what came out of both Neihardt's and Brown's accounts but also due to some very specific happenings that suggest otherwise.<sup>xlviii</sup> All in all, everything we know about the man has always been told through or by someone else, and that alone is enough to bring about different points of view regarding his life as a shaman and a catechist.

In fact, Black Elk's methods of instruction were very peculiar. As told by his daughter, herself a devout Catholic<sup>xlix</sup> who wanted to make it clear that her father had completely given up his shamanistic practices, the Arapahos had once been in quarantine against the German measles and after it had been lifted they came to Black Elk to be instructed. The problem was they could not get a permit for gatherings because of the quarantine and Black Elk had to ask the agent for one. He was given the permit and not only did he tell the Arapahos to attend but he also asked them to bring their Indian costumes to mass so that they could have their feasts and dances. Black Elk was very much aware of the Indians' need to perform their religious dances even if it were to be under the roof of the new creed, which was Catholicism. By allowing the Arapahos to wear their costumes and to actually dance he might have been following the vision of his childhood wherein he received a divine message to guide his people into better days.

Hence if even such an apparently meaningless story might have been invented by Black Elk, or by those who give us their representations of the holy man of the Oglala, what can we say about the veracity of everything else concerning his life story? Or, does it really matter whether or not the accounts based on his life are absolutely true in a historical sense? Is it worth denying Black Elk's shamanistic past in favor of his Catholic years in spite of everything he told Neihardt and Brown, and despite his choosing to perform the old rituals again after he retired from his church work albeit in reenactment of traditional Lakota life at some Sioux Indian Pageant for a white tourist audience?<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to observe here the fact that Black Elk had already been a performer, had "acted the Indian," in Buffalo Bill's show. Hence, Elk can also be seen as a performer of roles for different people. This does not make him a fake or charlatan, as long as some underlying principle of religion/spirit remains the same for him within the externals of his performance. It seems clear that by the end of his life Black Elk looked back to his old beliefs with an inclusive view less to deny his whole Catholic knowledge than to assimilate it into his whole experience as a true religious man. It might have been difficult for Lucy to accept her father's undergoing a healing ceremony, in which an old shaman cured him from the effects of a stroke. Had he not been convinced of the spiritual healing powers of the ceremony Black Elk would not have bothered seeing his cousin Little Warrior at all and might as well have done nothing about it.

As I have previously pointed out, Clyde Holler is a theologian and his interest in Black Elk is pervaded by his own agenda. As a significant example, it is interesting to observe that not only in this work but also in his preceding ones on Elk, Holler never makes use of the word shaman to designate his object of study. He prefers, alongside with Steltenkamp, the Jesuit, the more inclusive and religiously oriented term "holy man" instead of the word more associated with pagan practices, "shaman." For Holler, the scholarly work on Black Elk has proven decisive in the shift from the early days' worship of Elk's message as an immaculate Romantic portrayal of old-time Lakota traditional belief, as in the works of Neihardt and Brown, into the current questioning and critiquing of those early representations, leading to a more wide understanding of such texts, as in the works of Powers, DeMallie, Steltenkamp, and his own. Thus, in Holler's view, even though that previous immaculate quality has somehow been effaced by scholarship, the importance of studying the texts representing Black Elk has increased:

Although those texts can no longer be read as a cry from the depths of pristine Lakota consciousness, in my view they stand revealed as something vastly more important, the record of a great Lakota *holy man's* response to the sweeping economic and cultural change of his times and to the challenge presented by an invasive religion backed by a hostile government.<sup>li</sup>

Holler calls our attention to the religious and cultural importance of Black Elk in America today. On the one hand, it seems "impossible to imagine the revival of Native American religion without *Black Elk Speaks*," and on the other hand, the teachings of the Oglala shaman have certainly "made them attractive far beyond their original cultural horizon."<sup>lii</sup> Writing in the context of the study of religions, Holler traces parallels between Elk, "a leader of an oppressed people," and other similar figures in contemporary American history such as Martin

Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Clearly aware of the debates over the Elkian literary corpus being inserted in a multi-disciplinary representational frame, Holler nevertheless asserts in the prophetic-literary style, which has become unavoidable since Neihardt, the value of his favorite subject: “as one of the best-documented and most influential Native American leaders of the twentieth century, Black Elk’s shadow falls in a number of different directions. Ignore him at your peril if you are interested in American thought and culture.”<sup>liii</sup>

According to Ruth J. Heflin, the writings of Black Elk and those of other native Lakota writers, who “functioned as advocates for Indian rights,” have come to comprise an authentic *Oyate* literary revival.<sup>liv</sup> But differently from the other major modern *Oyate* writers who had been educated in the white man’s schools, such as Charles Eastman, Ella Deloria, and Luther Standing Bear, who, as Heflin points out, “never returned to their native ways of living,” Black Elk was the one who “most effectively spoke of and performed the act of passing on his knowledge to future generations.”<sup>lv</sup> Heflin sees *Black Elk Speaks* as a modernist experimental work, a hybrid text created by two authors, namely Neihardt and Elk, in which they “created an interstitial text, interweaving both Lakota and Euro-American literary and cultural influences.”<sup>lvi</sup> Heflin however sees the work as portraying not Neihardt’s but rather Elk’s own literary choice to the detriment of the anthropological account. Heflin believes that Black Elk made a very conscious decision when choosing Neihardt, a poet who was familiar with native ways, instead of an anthropologist to work as his amanuensis.

Despite having lived most of his life on the reservation, Black Elk had also seen the world when traveling with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show from 1887 to 1889, which enabled him to have a wider understanding of the white man’s world. In addition, he had already become a Catholic catechist who knew his way around the white man’s religion, all of which had made him very much aware of the “widespread impact of written stories in English.”<sup>lvii</sup> Another interesting aspect raised by Heflin as she analyzes Elk’s literary options is that the shaman, himself a visionary poet, would naturally choose another poet who would similarly speak “a kind of ritual language, something like the *hanbloglaka* (the term Black Elk used to describe Neihardt’s mission to be an epic poet) used by those interpreting visions.”<sup>lviii</sup> Thus, *Black Elk Speaks* can be seen as a historically inserted modernist work of art, wherein polyvocal narratives become the means to “intermix ‘primitive’ rituals and symbols into more familiar literary structures.”<sup>lix</sup> But whereas Neihardt’s motivations might have been aesthetically Western, Black Elk’s appear as what I would call social modernism, in that for him, the message contained in his writings should yield the completion of his sacred role of visionary repository of native values.

When Black Elk decided to tell his story, and that of his people, to the world, by choosing Neihardt, the poet, as his amanuensis, he must have been aware of the harsh criticisms he would suffer within his own community, both with the Indians and with the priests. On the one hand, Elk offended the Jesuit priests at the Holy Rosary Mission, where he had been one of the most dedicated catechists. In fact, there is even a letter written “by” Elk and the priests renouncing both the book and Neihardt.<sup>lx</sup> On the other hand, revealing traditional materials to the white men had never been the observed paradigm among the Lakota, or any other native community. According to Heflin, “there are many indications that Black Elk was rebuffed to some degree for having ‘conspired’ with the outsider.”<sup>lxi</sup> It has been argued that putting down the sacred on paper has irrevocably yielded the desacralization of traditional materials. As Elaine Jahner points out:

All genres of oral literature are performance genres. Although this is commonly recognized, few people follow through with the implications of that fact and consider how the medium of presentation carries its own, often subliminal message. Switching from an oral to a written medium automatically and necessarily involves a loss of meaning, and all attempts to compensate for that loss can be only provisional.<sup>lxii</sup>

On the one hand, the essence of the ritual performance loses its power when transcribed into the secular world and hence transforms an oral-based tradition into a written commodity. As we are told by James Walker, the Oglala Sioux, in their nomadic wanderings, would scatter in the warmer seasons but during the winter time they were used to camping together. This is how Walker describes their winter activities:

Here their only pastimes were feasting, dancing, gaming, and listening to stories. There were among them professional story tellers, the best of whom were the shamans or holy men; for they understood the mythology of the Sioux which was kept from the knowledge of the common people.<sup>lxiii</sup>

It is precisely by relying on his understanding of his people’s mythology that Black Elk decided to somehow go against the tradition of keeping the stories inside his community. Thus, on the other hand, this binding “loss” becomes the necessary means for traditional sacred values to survive the onslaughts of modernity, and art, through the poetic vision of both Neihardt and Elk, becomes an alternative way to convey traditional continuity within a hostile cultural environment.

Autobiographies such as Black Elk's are in fact multivocal works that reveal contrastive cultural voices, that is, they are a dialectical product of two cultures debating their own agendas with each other. According to David Murray, *Black Elk Speaks* is a perfect example of such dialectical debate, which:

Blends the historical and the spiritual to present a moving account of a world-view in which all aspects of existence are integrated into a whole but which seems ultimately powerless to present the remorseless disintegrating forces of white civilization. This gives Black Elk's account an epic sweep and grandeur untypical of autobiographies, in that the individual becomes almost incidental, even though fully realized and human.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Despite the obvious decontextualization involved in treating it as a work of art, as in the case of *Black Elk Speaks*, in which the multiple representations of a ritual performance are lost, the basic ingredient in traditional Indian view is maintained, namely that of the shaman being the repository of the history of his people and the one responsible for the continuation of his people's history, in being the one who (re)tells them their own stories. So when Black Elk decides to break such tradition, that is, to let the stories of his people be heard by the "common people" he is certainly aware of taking a necessary risk lest his people might not survive the imminent assimilation.

Overall it seems that Black Elk's vision was accomplished; that his belief in the power of the mythic road was not shaken, that his fear of not being able to lead his people to better days did not come true, in the sense that he was after all able to bring their cultural and religious tradition to a much wider public than he would have ever imagined during his lifetime. In spite of all the different representations of his words and actions by the white man, it appears as if Black Elk had it all planned, as if he could anticipate, in all his plain though clairvoyant wisdom, the entire future debate his message would yield one day. And as he once cleverly remarked, as if answering the questions above: "It's like a dog who gets so hungry at times it goes out and gets all sorts of bones. Even if they're dry and rotted, he carries them back to the house and just piles them up stinking... That's the way it is with people. They like to hear and speak harsh words all the time in all places."<sup>lxv</sup> All in all, Black Elk's dialogue with Neihardt could be seen as the primary seed from which a copious tree would flower. Had the Nebraska poet not met the Oglala shaman during the summer of 1930 we would have probably been left without the whole debate generated by the encounter between those two intriguing figures at the crossroads of such different though convergent worlds.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> Black Elk's words on how to pray with the Holy Pipe, in Joseph Epes Brown (ed.) *The Sacred Pipe* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971) 49.

<sup>ii</sup> John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* [1932] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) xiv. Nicholas Black Elk was a member of the Oglala, which refers to a tribe among the Sioux, or Lakota, the large group of Native Americans that live near the region of the Great Plains in North America.

<sup>iii</sup> *Shamanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) was originally published in French in 1951. Eliade is certainly the chief commentator on shamanism among Western thinkers, and in my opinion, the widespread view of shamanism as a fundamental religious concept, of shamanism as the primary ingredient of religion, is the effect of his comments on the subject. Rather than being a neutral authority, Eliade is thus responsible for the creation of the category. A native of Romania, Mircea Eliade lectured in the Ecole des Hautes-Etudes of the Sorbonne and was Chairman of the Department of History of Religions at the University of Chicago. Having published many important books on religious themes, Eliade was certainly the first Western scholar to take up the problem of shamanism and fully define it. Interestingly enough, before becoming a historian of religion dedicating his life to the scholarly reinterpretation of the sacred dimensions of religion and thought, and aligning these against a contemporary desacralization of nature, Eliade had been an experimental writer in his native Rumania, publishing novels (including occult fiction), travel writing, and personal philosophy. For a complete bibliography on Eliade's early fictional work, along with his scientific ones see: Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 261-270.

<sup>iv</sup> E. J. Langdon points out to the essential difference, in Eliade's view, between soul flight, typical of shamanism, and possession, typical of African religions, in E. J. Matteson Langdon and Gerhard Baer (eds.), *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992) 4.

<sup>v</sup> See Alfred Metraux, *Ethnology of Easter Island* (Honolulu, The Museum, 1940), "Religion and Shamanism" in *The Comparative Ethnology of South American Indians* (Washington: 1949), *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York:

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Schocken Books, 1972 [1959]), *The History of the Incas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961); Harald Motzki, *Schamanismus als Problem religionswissenschaftlicher Terminologie* (Bonn, University of Bonn, 1977); and Gerhard Baer, *L'Ethnologie dans le dialogue interculturel* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1983).

<sup>vi</sup> A typical shamanic practice among Native Americans at large, the vision quest is to be pursued by the shaman during his initiation and henceforth at any given ritual, involving sexual abstinence, fasting and the ingestion of sacred plants.

<sup>vii</sup> Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance* (New York: Holt, R & W, 1989) 51. This is a very controversial issue and Lenore Stiffarm indirectly refutes Kehoe's assertion when she shows the enormous differences among demographic censuses, mainly when opposing official numbers to independent accounts. Hence, as pointed out by Stiffarm, Henry F. Dobyns, an independent worker, "arrived at a tentative estimate of 90 to 112 million people" living in America in pre-Columbian times, whereas Douglas Ubelaker, working for the Smithsonian Institute, concluded that "the precontact native population of North America had been precisely 2,171,125," in "The Demography of Native North America" in M. Annette Jaimes (ed.), *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 26.

<sup>viii</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 44.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Sacred Pipe* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971) xix. In the winter of 1947-48 Black Elk granted a number of interviews on Lakota traditional beliefs to Joseph Epes Brown who published them in 1953. In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk parallels the seven sacraments of Roman Catholicism to seven rituals of Lakota religion. As with almost all the textual material involving Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe's* authenticity has been a growing topic in scholarly research. See Gregory P. Fields, "Inipi, the Purification Rite (Sweat Lodge); and Paul B. Steinmetz, "The New Missiology and Black Elk's Individuation" in Clyde Holler (ed.), *The Black Elk Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 169-187; 262-281. The idea of Wakan Tanka as a parallel to God is part of an attempt to see Plains religion as "higher," more spiritual than others, because more close to monotheism, so it may be exaggerated by white commentators.

<sup>x</sup> Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995) 181.

<sup>xi</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 113.

<sup>xii</sup> Raymond DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

<sup>xiii</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, xix.

<sup>xiv</sup> Amanda Porterfield, "Black Elk's Significance in American Culture" in Clyde Holler (ed.), *The Black Elk Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 40.

<sup>xv</sup> Porterfield, "Black Elk's Significance" 41.

<sup>xvi</sup> Porterfield, "Black Elk's Significance" 49.

<sup>xvii</sup> Porterfield, "Black Elk's Significance" 51.

<sup>xviii</sup> Porterfield, "Black Elk's Significance" 52.

<sup>xix</sup> See Robert F. Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>xx</sup> Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 30.

<sup>xxi</sup> Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 2.

<sup>xxii</sup> R. Todd Wise, "The Great Vision of Black Elk as Literary Ritual" in Clyde Holler (ed.), *The Black Elk Reader*, 241.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cf. Clyde Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* [52 (1): 1984] 19-45.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Wise, "The Great Vision" 242.

<sup>xxv</sup> Hilda Neihardt writes of an interview between her father and Black Elk's son, Ben, in which the latter explains why his father picked up that name: "We knew that you were a poet, but we have no word that translates for poet, so he called you a word sender. And he said, 'A word sender. And it's just like a garden, a flower garden. And it's just like rain on a flower garden. And that the words as you go past, why, it leaves some of it and then leaves it green. And then when it is gone, at the end when you're gone,' he said, 'your words will be memories, and it will be always a long time in the west – as a flaming rainbow'" in *Black Elk & Flaming Rainbow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 128.

<sup>xxvi</sup> For shamanism as mental illnesses see: Waldemar Bogoras, *The Chukchee* (New York: G. E. Stechert, 1904); Marie Antoinette Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914); George Devereux, "Shamans as Neurotics" in *American Anthropologist* [63: 1961] 1088-1090; J. Silverman, "Shamanism and Acute Schizophrenia" in *American Anthropologist* [69: 1967] 21-31; and Roger Walsh, "The Psychological Health of Shamans: A Reevaluation" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* [65 (1): 1997] 101-124.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Wise, "The Great Vision" 243.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "Image and Language in Psychoanalysis" in J. Smith (ed.), *Psychiatry and the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) 293-294.

<sup>xxix</sup> Wise, "The Great Vision" 245.

<sup>xxx</sup> As we are told by Reece Pendleton, Neihardt was introduced to Vedantic philosophy by Professor Durrin, a local tombstone maker who had hired him to work at his shop, in "A Ghostly Splendor: John G. Neihardt's Spiritual Preparation for Entry into Black Elk's World" in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* [19 (4): 1995] 213-229. As Neihardt explains, "in my feverishly groping teens I had been far more powerfully moved by Vedantist conceptions than by any faith widely held in the Occident" in *Poetic Values: Their Reality and Our Need of Them* (New York: MacMillan, 1925) 20.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Pendleton, "A Ghostly Splendor" 219.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Cited by Pendleton, letter to Dr. Horst Frens, 6 August 1939, in *Neihardt Collection* (Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Ellis Library, University of Missouri).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Pendleton, "A Ghostly Splendor" 227.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Introduction by Vine Deloria Jr. to *Black Elk Speaks* (Op. cit) xiv. Deloria Jr. belongs to a lineage of Lakota writers somehow linked to Black Elk's own story which includes his mother Ella Deloria, a linguist and ethnographer at the University of Columbia, who was the daughter of a Yankton chief, Philip Deloria, himself the son of a medicine man who had like Elk become a Christian in order to help his people.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Neihardt's primary motivation when he first set out to interview Black Elk was to gather information about the messianic movement of the Ghost Dance for his epic poem "A Cycle of the West."

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) xv.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Steltenkamp, *Holy Man*, xvi.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> William K. Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks Everybody Listens" in Christopher Vecsey (ed.), *Religion in Native North America* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1990) 140.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Julian Rice, *Black Elk's Story: Distinguishing Its Lakota Purpose* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991) 152.

<sup>xl</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 141.

<sup>xli</sup> William K. Powers, *Beyond the Vision* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987) 3.

<sup>xlii</sup> Powers' predilection for a literary approach seems clear as he usually embellishes his own narratives in ways not consistent with a traditional Boasian approach, as in *Yuwipi: Vision and Experience in Oglala Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

<sup>xliii</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 35.

<sup>xliv</sup> James R. Walker, who spent many years collecting information on Lakota myths *in situ*, tells of the use of such term among the Indians: "I have not yet [asked] an interpreter for the meaning of it but what he replied instantly 'The Great Spirit.' Today if any Lakota is speaking to a white man he will use this term to mean Jehovah or the Christian God and by common consent it has come to mean the Great Spirit. This was a stumbling block to me for many years, and very confusing when trying to get the concepts of the older Indians [like Black Elk] expressed by it," *Lakota Myth* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 8.

<sup>xlv</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 49.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 3.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 3.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Holler asserts that Black Elk in fact never ceased taking part in Lakota rituals and ceremonies, without actually providing substantial evidence. As he puts it, "it can not be said that Black Elk never again practiced traditional religion ... a final observation may be relevant to the possibility that he continued to be involved with the Sun Dance or traditional religion or both during his years as a catechist," in *Black Elk's Religion*, 20.

<sup>xlix</sup> It is noticeable that Lucy herself, despite her ardent Catholic faith portrayed by Steltenkamp, eventually turned to traditional religion, an event the Jesuit significantly fails to mention. As told by Holler, "her religious commitment seemed to have changed shortly after speaking to Steltenkamp; Hilda Neihardt (John Neihardt's daughter) reports that after her husband, Leo, died in 1974, Lucy Looks Twice was very disappointed in Christianity. At the suggestion of friends, she read *Black Elk Speaks* for the first time, subsequently becoming a pipe carrier" Holler *Black Elk's Religion*, 13. After the publication of Steltenkamp's *Holy Man*, Neihardt's older daughter, Hilda, published *Black Elk & Flaming Rainbow*, in which she recollects her father's visits with Black Elk. According to Steltenkamp, Hilda's intention was mainly to advertise her father's book and hence any kind of Christian-based allusions, like Steltenkamp's, were not welcome. As the Jesuit himself writes: "because of our very different interest in Black Elk's story, Hilda Neihardt and I will perhaps always represent polar perspectives" from "Retrospective on *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*" in Holler *The Black Elk Reader*, 110. Accordingly, Steltenkamp argues that even though her work came to be considered as an authoritative contribution by Holler, Hilda misinterpreted Lucy's alleged conversion to the old ways by becoming a pipe carrier, after finally reading *Black Elk Speaks*, relying on a mere photograph of Lucy carrying the pipe for a promotional play based on *Black Elk Speaks*. As can be seen, this ongoing debate seems far from ending and reveals once again the ambiguous character of Elk's Lakota Catholicism, typical of the shaman's effort for the continuation of his vision.

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<sup>i</sup> As shown by Steltenkamp, *Black Elk*, 112, Black Elk was truly delighted to perform the old rituals again in the company of his grandson. De Maille's explanation for Elk's motivation is quite significant: "these sacred rituals appear to have been to teach white audiences that the old-time Lakota religion was a true religion, not devil worship as the missionaries claim," *The Sixth Grandfather*, 66.

<sup>ii</sup> Clyde Holler, *The Black Elk Reader*, xiv [italics mine].

<sup>iii</sup> It is interesting to observe that within the range of this other cultural horizon Black Elk has been embraced by New Age activists in general. Two examples worth mentioning here are Richard Erdoes and John Lame Deer, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), and William S. Lyon and Wallace Black Elk, *Black Elk: the Sacred Ways of a Lakota* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). Both works rely heavily upon the revitalization of old rituals at the expense of any Christian allusion formerly connected to traditional Lakota belief, as with later representations of Black Elk's Catholic years. Accordingly, Steltenkamp writes, making his own judgements on what Black Elk himself felt, that "together, Wallace and Lame Deer represent a late twentieth-century ideology that asserts that to be Indian means to be non-Christian. Their thought is the exact opposite of what the revered Black Elk spoke, believed, or felt." In Holler, *The Black Elk Reader*, 114.

<sup>liii</sup> Holler, *The Black Elk Reader*, xv. Another interesting recurring parallel in Holler's representation of Black Elk is his comparison between the teachings of the leaders of Native American and Christian religions, that is, Elk and Jesus, in that both teachings, stemming from a living oral tradition, "are appropriated and adapted by [their] successors."

<sup>liv</sup> Ruth J. Heflin, "Black Elk Passes on the Power of the Earth" in Clyde Holler, *The Black Elk Reader*, 18. For the other Lakota writers see: Charles Eastman, *Old Indian Days* (New York: McClure Phillips, 1907), *The Indian Today: The Past and Future of the First American* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1915), *From Deep Woods to Civilization* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977); Ella Deloria, *Dakota Texts* (New York: AMS Press, 1974), *Waterlily* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); and Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1978).

<sup>lv</sup> Heflin, "Black Elk" 18.

<sup>lvi</sup> Heflin, "Black Elk" 3.

<sup>lvii</sup> Heflin, "Black Elk" 4.

<sup>lviii</sup> Heflin, "Black Elk" 6. This sacred language is a common motif in shamanism. Accordingly, William K. Powers writes that Lakota shamans "were distinguishable from the common people not only by their ability to interpret sacred knowledge but also by their ability to communicate in a special language unintelligible to the uninitiated," in *Oglala Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975) 65.

<sup>lix</sup> Heflin, "Black Elk" 7.

<sup>lx</sup> See De Maille, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 58-62.

<sup>lxi</sup> Heflin, "Black Elk" 16.

<sup>lxii</sup> Elaine A. Jahner, in the "Introduction" to James R. Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 29.

<sup>lxiii</sup> James R. Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 205.

<sup>lxiv</sup> David Murray, "Autobiography and Authorship: Identity and Unity" in David Murray (ed.), *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing, and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 71.

<sup>lxv</sup> Steltenkamp, *Holy Man*, 92.